

Beginning marks end

Final commencement at Taylor-Fort Wayne is bittersweet

BY AARON ORGAN

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In a day filled with emotion, tears and goodbyes, the final commencement ceremony at Taylor University Fort Wayne saw the typical joy of such an event muted by the word "bittersweet."

Ninety-two students walked across the makeshift stage Saturday – two people twice – inside the standing-room-only gymnasium of Gerig Activities Center.

But while the university strived to make Saturday's commencement as normal as any other

year's, the elephant in the room was obvious.

Elsewhere

◆ Whitney Cerak, Taylor crash survivor, graduates at Upland campus. **Page 8A**

◆ More photos from the Taylor University-Fort Wayne ceremony. **Page 8A**

"It's a great feeling to graduate, and yet it's sad in the fact that the school is closing," said 48-year-old Kent Green of Leo, who

graduated with a degree in pastoral ministries. "There's been some sort of Bible college here since the early 1900s. Just to see it close, it's sad, so it's a bittersweet day."

The Taylor board of trustees at the evangelical Christian university's main campus in Upland decided in October to close the school's Fort Wayne campus, citing an enrollment drop of 45 percent since 2003. It chose to move the online and professional writing programs to Upland as a result.

The decision left freshmen, sophomores and juniors scrambling and a senior class, on Saturday especially, visibly saddened.



By Ellie Bogue of The News-Sentinel

Nina Anderson waves her diploma in the air as she receives her bachelor of science degree in pastoral ministries Saturday at Taylor University Fort Wayne. She is in the last class to graduate from the Fort Wayne campus.

"It's full of emotion, I guess," said Brett Sauder, 36, of Churubusco, who earned a pastoral ministries degree. "It leaves a lasting memory that we were the last graduating class."

These graduates came to Tay-

lor for much more than a degree, as most said they were recruited to the school by God. As it turns out, most are leaving with far more than a degree, too.

Taylor's class of 2009 faced considerable adversity. Their mettle

was tested from their first year on campus.

Two months into their schooling, a fire heavily damaged Schultz Hall, displacing dozens.

See **TAYLOR**, Page 8A



A bagpiper playing "Amazing Grace" led the last graduating class from Taylor University Fort Wayne out of the gymnasium after the graduation ceremony Saturday afternoon.

TAYLOR

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A Taylor student was later charged with arson.

In the spring of their freshman year, four Upland students and one staff member were killed in a crash on Interstate 69. They were headed back to Upland from the Fort Wayne campus.

The tragedy was compounded when it was later discovered that the identity of a victim and a survivor were mixed up.

Then came the announcement their campus would be closed. Green said the way the student body stuck together through that is something he'll forever remember.

Khrista Beckmann, one of two graduates who received two degrees Saturday, agreed.

"We've been through a lot together," said Beckmann, 23, of Columbus Grove, Ohio. "We have gotten to know each other on a deeper level, because when you go through crisis, things dramatically change."

Beckmann, who double-majored in professional writing and marketing communication, said those relationships among students and faculty alike are what will last.

"This school, this institution is not all about buildings and mortar, it's about the people, and we'll always have those relationships," said Beckmann.

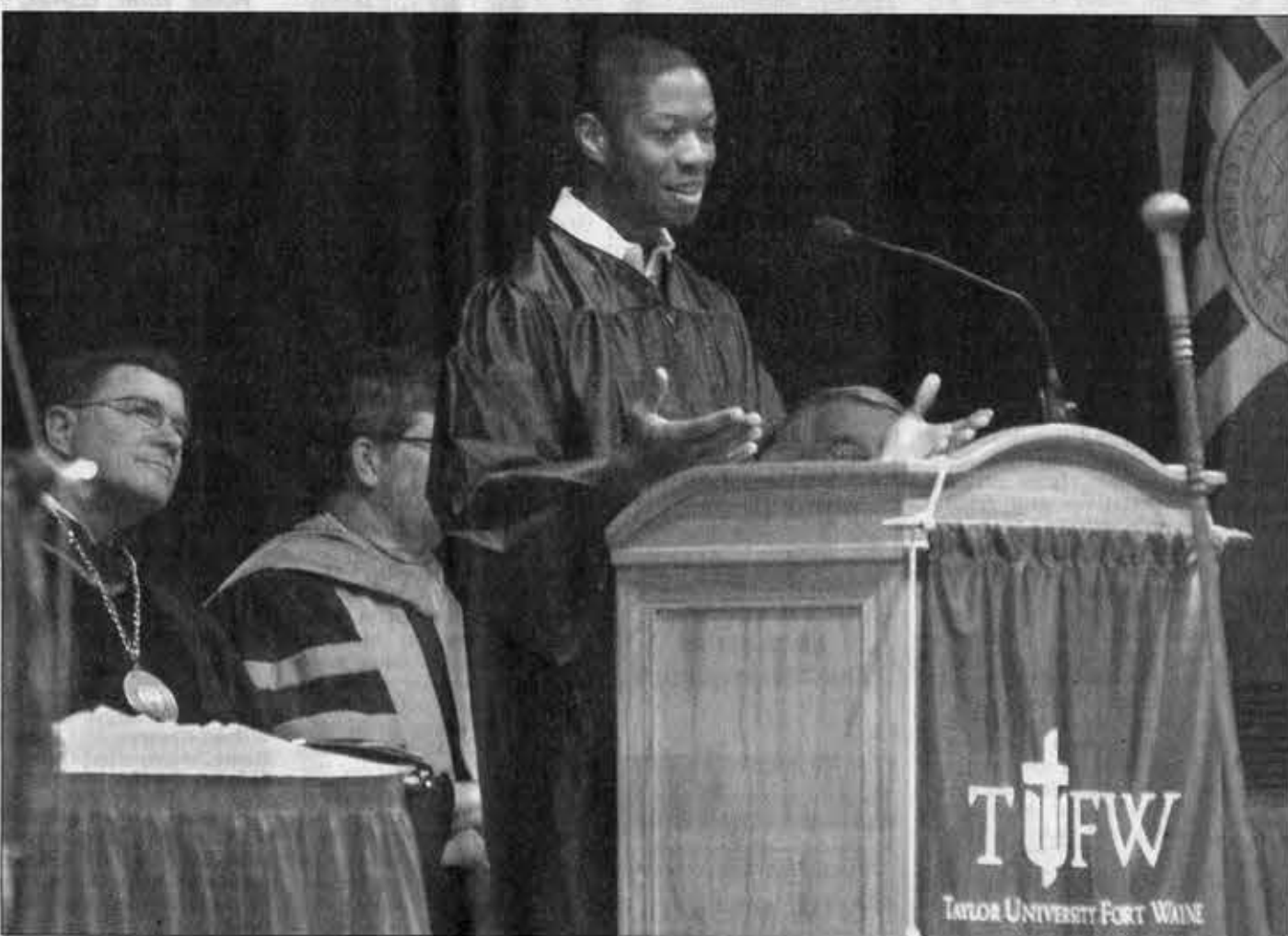
"It's very much bittersweet. I'm happy to graduate and be the last class and that's a great honor, but it's also sad."

Photos by Ellie Bogue of The News-Sentinel



ABOVE: Khrista Beckmann, left, gets a handshake from classmate Holly Blott after the two received their Bachelor of Arts degrees Saturday afternoon at Taylor University Fort Wayne.

LEFT: Nina Anderson wipes away a tear after receiving her Bachelor of Science degree in Pastoral Ministries on Saturday.



Taylor University Fort Wayne Class of 2009 President Terrance John Johnson delivers the student address, titled "Senior Reflections," during commencement Saturday afternoon.

Whitney Cerak, Taylor crash survivor, graduates

She was believed killed in identification mixup.

From The Associated Press

UPLAND — A Michigan woman once believed to have died in a horrific van crash three years ago has graduated from college.

Whitney Cerak of Gaylord, Mich., graduated Saturday from Taylor University and plans to travel soon to Kenya to work with



Cerak: Families learned truth after 5 weeks

her sister helping children.

"We are excited to see her reach this milestone of graduation. It just didn't seem possible three years ago," Taylor spokesman Jim Garringer said.

"In fact, three years ago, we didn't even know that she had survived the accident."

Cerak was thought to have been among the four Taylor students who died with a university staff member on April 26, 2006, after a semitrailer crossed a median and crashed into their van on Interstate 69. They were returning from an event in Fort Wayne to the campus of the evangelical Christian liberal arts school.

The county coroner misidentified Cerak as one of the students who died, and her family even held a funeral for her. But five weeks af-

ter the crash, the family of another student, Laura Van Ryn of Caledonia, Mich., realized the hospitalized young woman they thought was their daughter actually was Cerak.

"She simply got into a van with some friends, and when she woke up, she was in the center of this vortex," Garringer said.

Police investigators determined the driver of the semi that struck the van, Robert F. Spencer of Canton Township near Detroit, had

fallen asleep at the wheel. He pleaded guilty to reckless homicide and criminal recklessness and was given an eight-year prison sentence with four years suspended. He was released from prison last August.

Cerak has said she plans to travel to Kenya in July and remain there through February.

"We rejoice with her and her family and look forward to what this next stage in life holds for her," Garringer said.